



UNITED STATES
COURTHOUSE
PROVIDENCE, RI
100 *Years*
1908 - 2008

The Architecture

of the

United States Courthouse
Providence, Rhode Island

A SELF-GUIDED TOUR



Acknowledgment

Most of the information contained in this document was taken from the "U.S. Federal Building, Providence, Rhode Island - Historic Structures Report" dated August 6, 1990, prepared by Ann Beha Architects, 33 Kingston Street, Boston, MA 02111.



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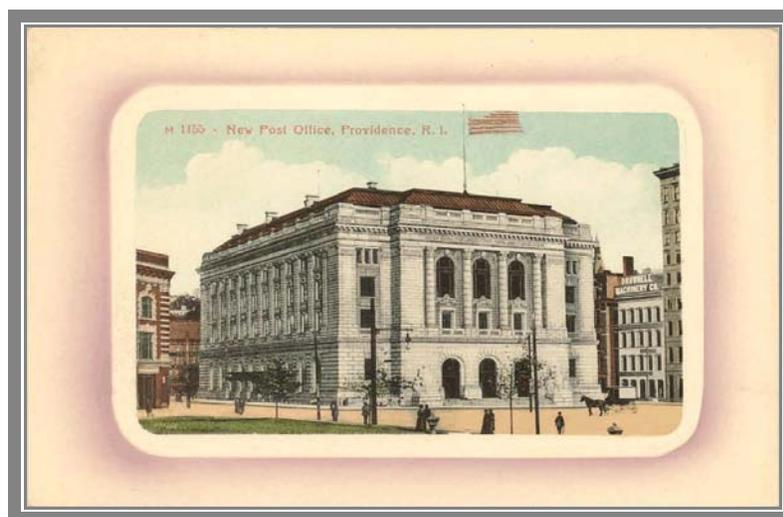
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Introduction

The Providence Post Office, Court House and Customs House was constructed in 1904-08 as the city's third Federal building and is considered a key element of the Downtown Providence National Register Historic District. Designed by the local architectural firm of Clarke & Howe, it was one of the few Federal buildings of the period to be contracted to a private firm under the provisions of the Tarsney Act. It is an exceptionally well-conceived example of the classical Beaux Arts style design favored for monumental public buildings at the turn of the century. In its day it was considered one of the finest federal buildings to be found outside of Washington D.C. Its design and its siting are also noteworthy for their impact on the urban expression of Exchange Place as the civic center.

The building was turned over to the GSA in January 1961, following completion of the nation's first automated post office. At that time, the building was devoted primarily to judicial functions, and was renamed the Providence Federal Building and Courthouse. Reconfiguring of some interior spaces, most notably the former postal workroom, was accomplished at that time. The building was listed in the National Register in 1972, and subsequent work has respected that status.

Today, the building remains largely intact, especially on the exterior where no important changes have disrupted the original architectural character. The interior has also retained most of its important spaces and finishes. The major exception is the removal of the first story postal workroom and its crowning skylight. Despite this loss, the "look-out galleries" that ringed the area were retained. The main lobby, with its vaulted limestone ceiling, also remains, lacking only the service windows that once opened into the postal workroom. All of the important spaces related to the courts – courtrooms, judges' chambers and library – have been preserved.



PART I - OVERVIEW



Photograph Courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith

Architectural Description

The U. S. Federal Building and Courthouse is located between Fulton Street and Washington Street on the east end of Kennedy Plaza (formerly known as Exchange Place) in downtown Providence. The building is seven bays wide and twelve bays long. It occupies all of its rectangular site, with the exception of a parking area at the east end of the site adjacent to the Woonasquatucket River. It is steel frame construction, five stories above a full basement, clad entirely in grey granite. A mezzanine level, whose area is about half the

building footprint, is located between the first and second stories. A large central light court provides illumination to the center portions of the top four floors. The main entry is located in the front elevation facing Kennedy Plaza. A more modest rear entry opens toward the river.

The building, designed by Clarke and Howe in 1904-06, is a good example of the Beaux Arts ideals of architecture and urban design popular for civic buildings at the time of its construction. The building is almost directly on axis with the old City Hall across Kennedy Plaza. By matching the massing and materials of old City Hall, Clarke and Howe established the nucleus of a formal City Beautiful composition.

The interior was originally designed to house three functions: a post office, customs offices, and a federal court. Customs and post office functions are now located elsewhere, and most of the building has been converted to courtroom and court administration uses. Despite the changes, renovations have been sensitive to the quality of the original, and much of the original interior finish remains, particularly in the principal interior spaces such as the entry lobbies and main stair, and the two major third floor courtrooms.

Construction

The Providence Post Office, Court House and Custom House was under construction for four years, and was the subject of two separate contracts, both awarded to Clarke & Howe as architects and Horton & Hemenway as general contractor. The architects produced separate sets



Photograph Courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith

of drawings and specifications for each phase. Newspaper articles at the completion of the project noted that it had been completed on schedule, within budget, and revealed high quality workmanship throughout.

The first phase, which involved site preparation, steel framing, and construction of exterior walls, began on December 22, 1904. Site preparation included relocation of the General Ambrose Burnside statue and railroad tracks, as well as creation of Post Office Square on the east side of the site. Additionally, the Providence River had to be bridged, and the problem of digging the basement to four feet below mean high water level had to be solved. By November 6, 1905, it

was noted that the frame was up 60' and had been topped by two large derricks used to hoist the beams into place. Wagon loads of brick were being hauled onto the site, and workmen were busy setting the granite basement. The exterior work was completed in December 1906 for a cost of \$489,500.

The contract for the second phase, which involved installation of interior finishes and mechanical systems, was awarded on March 5, 1907. The work was based on 123 pages of specifications and a new set of 50-60 drawings which were approved by Washington in January 1907. The work was completed on October 1, 1908 for a cost of \$355,200. The total \$1,000,000 authorization for the building was reached through change orders and additions, which included essential items such as elevators and furnishings. Finishing of the fourth and fifth stories was not part of the initial contract.

It was reported that the following amounts of materials had been used in construction: 3,500,000 bricks; 1,465 tons of steel; 70,000 cubic feet of granite; and 80,000 feet or 15 miles of electrical wiring. Mahogany paneling came from Mexico; other woods including, pine, maple, oak and ash came from the mid-West; marble came from Tennessee, Vermont and Italy; granite from New Hampshire; and limestone from Indiana.



Photograph Courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith

PART II - SELF-GUIDED TOUR

1st Floor

Original Design and Purpose

The first story was originally devoted to the needs of the post office. It was dominated by the large open space of the workroom, which was lit by a huge skylight and ringed by a system of look-out galleries at the mezzanine level. Service windows opened off the west end into the main lobby. Special departments with service windows open to the rear lobby were located on the east side. On the north was a mailing vestibule that served as the receiving area, and an adjacent freight elevator. A large registry workroom with service windows in the main lobby, occupied the northwest corner while offices for the Postmaster and Assistant Postmaster took up the northeast corner. Spaces for stamp sales, mail orders and a cashier, along with toilets and vaults were located on the south wall. The swing rooms, where workers gathered between shifts, were relegated to the east side of the mezzanine and to the basement.

Main Lobby

ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: The main lobby and stair form one of the building's most distinguished interior spaces. The lobby is made up of two principal elements. The entry immediately inside the entrance doors is formed of spherical vaults on piers. Beyond these spherical vaults is the large barrel vaulted lobby, whose axis lies parallel to the front elevation. Smaller cross vaults corresponding to the building bays intersect the main vault, creating openings opposite the entry which originally lit the central Post Office work room. At that time, these openings were filled with bronze and glass counters and screens. They are now filled with combination of ornate millwork and black glass with brass framework designed to simulate the original postal service windows. All other principal surfaces - piers, vaults, and walls - in the main lobby are limestone, called out as Indiana limestone on the original construction drawings. Pier bases and capitals are similar to those found on the building exterior. The vaulted ceiling is ornamented with moulded panels and paterae. Moulded limestone panels topped by broken



Photograph Courtesy of Gilbane, Inc.

curved pediments on consoles with carved female heads appear in the entry and the main lobby. They appear to have originally



Photograph Courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith

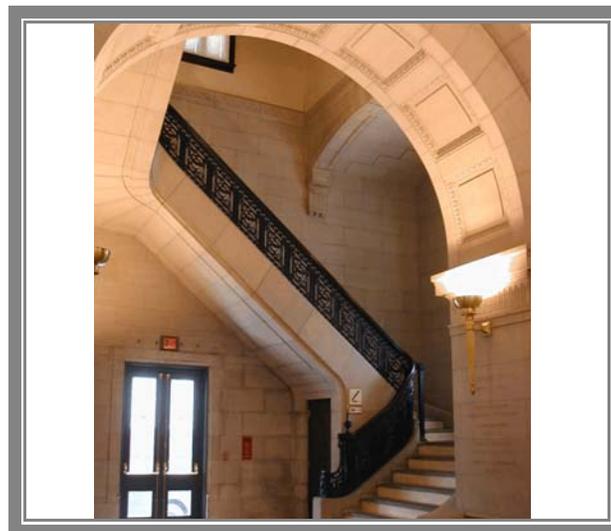
carried plaques or signage. In 1937, the original marble floor was replaced by the present marble and terrazzo, and bronze entry vestibules replaced the original wood revolving doors.

Many of the glass-globed ceiling light fixtures located at the intersection of the primary and secondary vaults appear to be original. The brass torch-shaped wall sconces, which were originally equipped with glass globes, have been refitted with up-lights. The globe lights at the top of the spherical vaults are not original.

NOTES: The Clerk's Office reception counter is situated in the location that was originally occupied by service windows for a large postal registry workroom.

Main Stair

ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: The main stair opens off the south end of the entry lobby, curving gracefully to the second floor. Wall surfaces, S-curved treads and risers are limestone. The moulded wood railing is supported by cast iron posts and strapwork balusters. The original iron door elevator, which is stair and the lobby corridor, has been



grille for the located between the opposite the main replaced.

Main Corridor

ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: The main and rear lobbies are connected by a main corridor whose finish matches that of the rear lobby. Originally the corridor contained bronze and glass windows to offices or bronze post office boxes serviced from the work room at the center of the first floor.

NOTES: As in the main and rear lobbies, the millwork and painted surfaces on either side of the corridor were designed to simulate the original postal service windows. The **Jury Assembly Room** now occupies most of what had originally been a large open postal workroom. With its large drop down projection screen and a ceiling-mounted projector connected to a full electronic presentation system, this room is used for a variety of court-related functions in addition to serving as the jury assembly area.



Rear Lobby

ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: Located just inside the rear entry, the rear lobby is finished with limestone piers similar to those in the main lobby and a spherically vaulted plaster ceiling. Ceiling light fixtures at the top of each vault are not original.

NOTES: As in the main lobby, the millwork and black glass with bronze framework simulates the original postal service windows. (This is no longer a public area of the building because of the secure parking facility located in the rear of the Courthouse.)

Rear Stair

ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: Opening off the intersection of the main corridor and the rear lobby is a small vestibule which serves as the landing for the rear stair, the lobby for the rear elevator and a secondary entrance onto Fulton Street. The rear stair, which is finished to railing height in white-veined marble, curves around a marble pier to an intermediate landing, arches over the stair entry, and doubles back to the second floor. The moulded wood railing is supported by cast iron posts and strapwork balusters. Plaster walls and ceilings are ornamented with moulded panels and acanthus leaf consoles.

2nd Floor

Original Design and Purpose

Originally, the second story served Treasury and Judiciary functions. It was arranged with offices along all of the outer walls and on the east and west sides of the light court. The west end included offices for the U.S. Attorney and a grand jury room. The south side was occupied by the Customs Division, the east by the Civil Service, and the north by the Internal Revenue Service.

ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: Two new courtrooms and chambers have been added at the second floor level which either retain some of the original finishes or reflect the original design in the new finishes.

3rd Floor

Original Design and Purpose

The third story was devoted to the Judiciary, and included some of the most elaborately finished spaces. It was arranged with rooms along all of the outer walls and on the east side of the light court. The major space was the District Court Room on the west front overlooking Exchange Place. The main judge's chamber and anteroom opened off the court on the north. The law library and two other judges' chambers occupied the remainder of the north side. The Equity Court Room was placed on the east side with a Petit Jury Room directly opposite on the light court. Clerk's offices and a record room were located on the south wall.

Courtroom 2 ("Equity Courtroom")

ARCHITECTURAL

EVALUATION: This courtroom, the second major original courtroom, is located behind the central pavilion on the rear of the building. This room is double height and has been changed very little. Finishes consist of quartered oak paneling, casing, and other woodwork. Walls and ceiling are finish with plaster. The room is rectangular in plan, with a raised judge's platform at one end and public entry through three side doors. A straight brass spectators' railing separates the public from the trial participants.



Photograph Courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith

Side and rear wall elevations are articulated by paired oak colossal Corinthian pilasters on a plain oak pedestal, which become engaged columns behind the judge's bench. Paneled oak wainscot is carried up to the window spring line, where it terminates in a carved frieze and cornice, accented by an acanthus leaf keystone between each pilaster pair. The oak entablature is furnished with enriched mouldings and paired acanthus leaf consoles in a paneled frieze. The cornice is continued across the ceiling as a beam casing at the top of each pilaster.



*Photograph Courtesy of
Carol M. Highsmith*

Above the oak paneling, plaster wall surface are divided into round, arched, and rectangular panels, decorated with plaster swags and keystones. The plaster ceiling is also paneled. The three arched windows opening toward the rear of the building are similar to those in the front of the building with wood sash set in wood mullions and casings. None of the original lighting remains.

NOTES: Because of this room’s historic status, care was taken to preserve most of the original features when the most recent renovation and restoration work was performed on the Courthouse between 1999 and 2006. However, over the years, the two most significant changes that have been made to this room are the addition of a jury box and a witness box, which were probably added after a second district judgeship was created in 1966. These features were not needed for an “equity” courtroom when the building was originally designed, and their addition created a number of design challenges.

One major element of the most recent work was the integration of state of the art courtroom technology into the historic fabric of the room. In the jury box, for example, flat screen monitors are imbedded in the front rail and within millwork pieces between the chairs on the second level. The attorney’s podium facing the bench contains a variety of evidence presentation equipment that broadcasts images to flat screen monitors for all of the participants in a trial.

Videoconference capability has been added to allow remote viewing of attorneys, witnesses and evidence. In order to accomplish this technological integration, the jury box was completely rebuilt and the entire floor within the bar enclosure was temporarily removed in order to lay all of the conduit and run the wiring that is needed to support these systems.

Another major element was the restoration and preservation of the surfaces within the room. All of the woodwork was cleaned and restored. The ceilings were stripped and painted in a manner that highlights the ornate details. The paint colors in this room are the original colors. The carpeting was designed to complement the color scheme and the ornate details of the room.

Another significant element was the upgrading of the lighting. Also, the six foot oak counsel tables are reproductions of the original, now antique, eight foot counsel tables, and they contain wire management features that accommodate courtroom technology. (The original tables from both the District and Equity Courtrooms can be found in the Historic Library located within the Third Floor Judges' Chambers and in other locations in the Courthouse.)

Original Corridors and Stairways (Second - Fifth Floors)

ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: The corridors throughout the building display much of their original character and finish and are significant as public passages linking all spaces in the building. Floors are the original pinkish-grey marble with white marble borders. The lower floors have a white marble base and wainscot. Door and window casing and associated paneling are quartered oak. Most office doors are the original one- or two-panel oak doors with original brass hardware. Many doors and transom lights are glazed with glue-flake patterned glass.

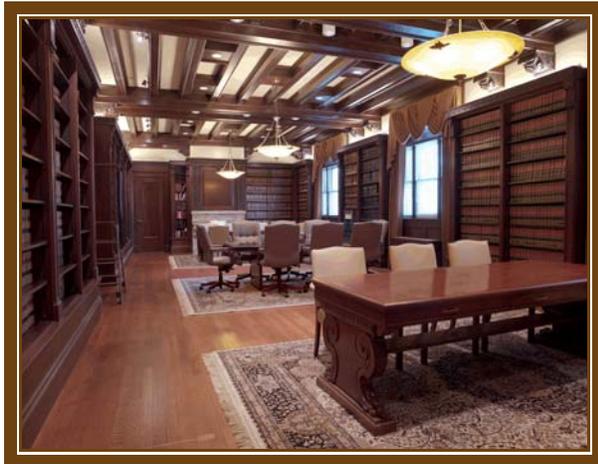
NOTES: The portraits of virtually every United States District Judge who was ever appointed to the District of Rhode Island bench hang on the walls of the third floor corridor. They are arranged chronologically based on the date of the appointment.

Light Court (Second - Fifth Floors)

ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: The central light court is three bays wide and four bays long. It extends down as far as the mezzanine level, where it terminates in a built-up roof, which replaced the original skylight over the Postal Work Room. The walls are organized in a manner similar to the exterior. An ashlar granite base at the mezzanine level appears below three stories (second through fourth) finished in buff brick, topped by an attic fifth story which is stepped back from the plane of the walls below. The middle three stories are articulated by colossal Tuscan pilasters with granite bases and capitals. The entablature at the top of the fourth floor consists of a granite architrave, buff brick frieze, and a granite dentiled cornice. The fifth floor attic story, which is set back behind a flat seam lead-coated copper roof, is plain buff brick with a lead-coated copper cornice.

Original Judges' Chambers

ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: The two major courtrooms and their associated judges' chambers form an important series of interior spaces which have been little modified since construction. The chambers consist of two judges' rooms, each with its associated anteroom and robing room, a library and several lesser offices. Finishes in the judges' rooms were originally the same, consisting of quartered oak wainscot, paneled plaster walls and cornice and plaster ceilings. Each room is furnished with a fine Italian marble mantel. In all rooms, the original lighting, which appears to have been pendent incandescent, has been replaced.



Photograph Courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith

Library (“Historic Library”)

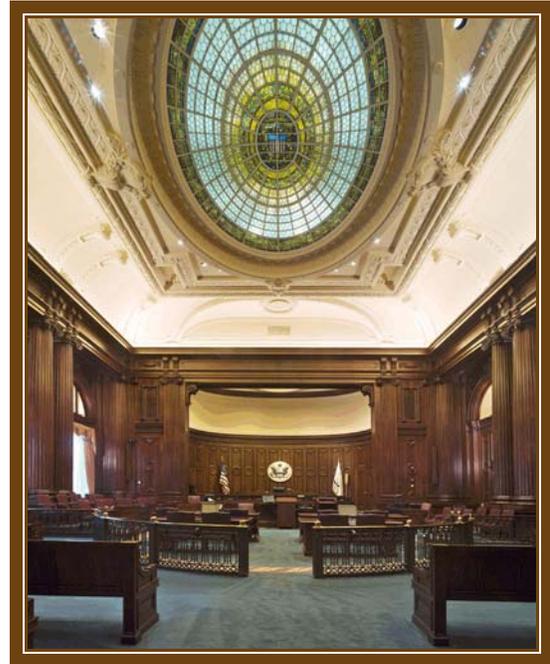
ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: The library is finished in mahogany paneling and shelving. Paired beams on scrolled consoles and secondary beams are also cased in mahogany. The original lighting, which appears to have been pendent incandescent, has been replaced.

NOTES: The eight foot oak tables at either end of the library are antiques; they are the original counsel tables from the District and Equity Courtrooms. Some of the law books on the shelves are original to the room.

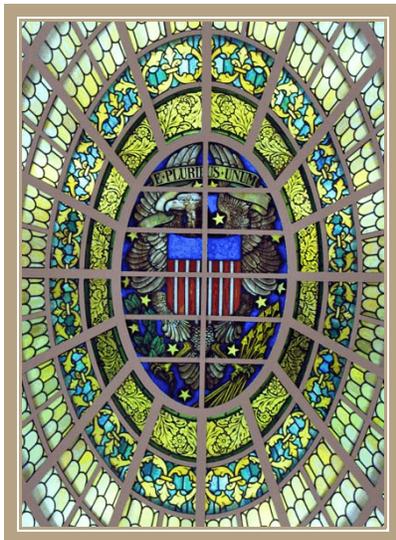
Courtroom One (“District Courtroom”)

ARCHITECTURAL EVALUATION: The District Courtroom has the most impressive interior in the building and occupies a prominent location behind the entry pavilion. The room appears to be essentially unchanged since its initial construction. Primary wall finishes are quartered oak paneling, casing, and other woodwork. The walls and ceilings are finished with plaster. The room is nearly square in plan, with an elliptical bay opposite the major public entry door, containing a raised platform for the Judge's bench. A brass spectators' railing curves toward the entry door, answering the shape of the Judge's bay.

The most prominent features of the room are paired colossal columns and entablature, topped by a vaulted plaster ceiling with elliptical laylight. The fluted columns with Scamozzi capitals stand on paneled oak pedestals. Quartered oak paneling, enlivened with a circle and chevron motif, covers the wall behind the columns to a height of about sixteen feet, with paneled plaster above. The oak entablature and beam casings are furnished with enriched mouldings; the paneled frieze is accented with doubled acanthus leaf consoles above the columns.



Photograph Courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith



Photograph Courtesy of Providence Journal

The vaulted plaster ceiling is articulated by plaster consoles and bay leaf torus mouldings. The elliptical stained glass laylight, which is set in the center of the ceiling, is surrounded by an acanthus-leafed cove, cartouches at the room axes, and other enriched mouldings. The laylight, which was originally lit naturally, is now lit from above by artificial lighting. It contains a U.S. shield with foliate and floral surround set in a fish scale-patterned opalescent field.

The public entry door, on axis with the Judge's bench, is framed by pilasters and an entablature on scrolled consoles. The curved broken pediment contains a carved oak eagle flanked by crossed flags above a shield and fasces. Other doors to the room, which communicate to the corridors and robing room, are much simpler.



Photograph Courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith



Photograph Courtesy of Gilbane, Inc.

The three arched windows facing Kennedy Plaza, and arched panels on the opposite wall occur between the colossal columns. They are framed with wood mullions and oak casings. Enriched mouldings, consoled keystones, and carved spandrels elaborate the window surrounds. The original lighting for the room, aside from the now closed skylight, is unknown.

NOTES: This is considered to be one of the most beautiful and impressive trial courtrooms in the country. Because of the room's historic status, care was taken to preserve original features when the most recent renovation and restoration work was performed on the Courthouse between 1999 and 2006, although minor changes and enhancements were made. One major element of that work was the integration of state of the art courtroom technology into the historic fabric of the room. In the jury box, for example, flat screen monitors are imbedded in the front rail and within millwork pieces between the chairs on the second and third levels. Two large speakers mounted inconspicuously on either side of the bench provide virtually all of the sound amplification needed for the room. The attorney's podium in front of the bench contains a variety of evidence presentation equipment that broadcasts images to flat screen monitors for all of the participants in a trial.



Photograph Courtesy of Gilbane, Inc.

Videoconference capability has been added to allow remote viewing of attorneys, witnesses and evidence. In order to accomplish this technological integration, the jury box was completely rebuilt and the entire floor within the bar enclosure was temporarily removed in order to lay all of the conduit and run the wiring that is needed to support these systems.

Another major element was the restoration and preservation of the surfaces within the room. All of the woodwork was cleaned and restored, as was the skylight. The ceilings were stripped and painted in a manner that highlights the ornate details. The paint colors in this room are not the original colors; historically compatible colors of the period have been used. The carpeting was designed to complement the color scheme and the ornate details of the room.

Another significant element was the upgrading and expansion of the lighting throughout the room. Also, the eight foot oak counsel tables closest to the bench are reproductions of the original, now antique, counsel tables, and they contain wire management features that accommodate courtroom technology. (The original tables from both the District and Equity Courtrooms can be found in the Historic Library located within the Third Floor Judges' Chambers and in other locations in the Courthouse.)

N.B. Have you wondered why there is an oar behind the judge's bench? The oar symbolizes the admiralty jurisdiction of Federal Courts, and since Rhode Island is the "Ocean State," admiralty cases have been filed in this court since its creation in 1790.

PART III - ADDENDUM

History of Federal Building Construction

1800-1851: During the early years of the republic, when Federal government functions were few and the population small, rented quarters were usually sufficient for the basic needs of the Customs Service, Courts and Postal Service. It was not until 1836 that the scope of construction activities had grown sufficiently to warrant appointment of a Federal Architect. During this early period, no uniform method of construction was observed, and local architects and/or builders contracted by the Federal government often had a fairly free hand.

1852-1891: The Office of the Supervising Architect was created within the Treasury Department in 1852, in response to the enormous increase in Federal construction. Ammi B. Young was the first person appointed to the position. The office was given responsibility for all architectural design and construction supervision in an effort to circumvent the often cumbersome and corrupt practice of awarding public design contracts. One of the early innovations of the office was the development of standardized building types to house the prevalent customs house, post office and court house functions. The architectural style selected for these buildings reflected prevailing national taste. The scope of the office's effort is revealed in the numbers of Federal buildings, which increased from 23 in 1853 to 297 by 1892, with 95 more under construction.

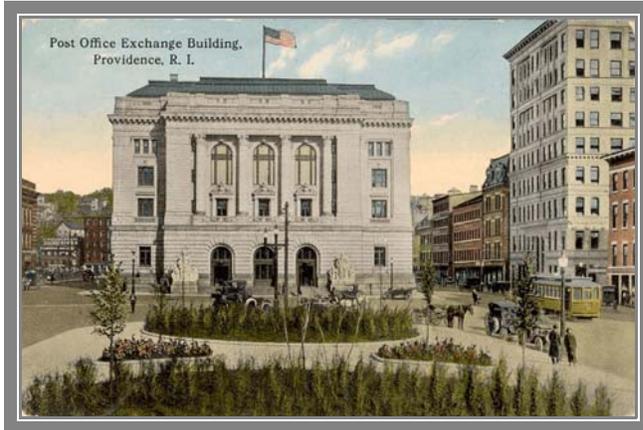
1890-1912: By the turn of the century, the Federal design process was once again perceived as flawed and corrupt, triggering two important changes. The first was passage of the Tarsney Act, which allowed, but did not require, the Treasury Department to hire private architects. The chief proponent of this legislation was the American Institute of Architects. Enacted in 1892, the Tarsney Act was not implemented until 1897, when a change in administration occurred; it was repealed in 1912 due to the excessive cost of employing outside architects.

The other change was passage of the first omnibus public buildings law in 1902, the first of many which totally changed the Federal construction process. It authorized construction of 150 buildings around the nation, in contrast to the 19th century practice of providing separate legislation for each building. Some scholars have linked the popularity of omnibus public building laws with Congressional desires to distribute "Federal presents" among their constituents. The scope of this law is illustrated by the massive increase in Federal buildings which rose from 399 in 1899 to 1,126 by 1912. Over two hundred of these buildings were post offices.

James Knox Taylor, a graduate of M.I.T., and Supervising Architect from 1897-1912, was the single major force in Federal Building construction during this period. As a champion

of Providence alone produced \$200 million in manufactured goods. By 1912, Rhode Island's per capita wealth had risen to second in the nation. Between 1865 and 1910, the city's population

jumped from just over 50,000 to almost 220,000. The city's pride was bolstered by elegant new buildings that reshaped the character of the downtown. Exchange Place (now known as Kennedy Plaza), a formerly undeveloped 250' by 1200' strip of central city land, defined by the Second Empire-style City Hall (1874) on the south and the Classical Revival-style Union Station (1896) on the west, was to become the focus of the civic center.



Early efforts to gain a new Federal building that would reflect the city's achievements met with little success.

Some residents felt that Providence was being ignored because Rhode Island, as the smallest state, did not carry sufficient weight in the national political arena. The debate finally took sharp focus when it was linked with efforts to improve Exchange Place, which needed the definition of another monumental public building on the east.

On February 7, 1900, a committee of the City Council was appointed to confer with the Rhode Island congressional delegation and Washington officials on the subject of a new federal building, and to offer the east end of Exchange Place as the site. Congress was finally convinced to appropriate \$1,000,000 on June 6, 1902 with the condition that the city donate the Exchange Place site. The City Council authorized transfer of the site to the Federal Government on July 7, 1902.

The local firm of Clarke & Howe was unanimously selected as architect in the fall of 1903. At the time this prestigious project was awarded, Clarke & Howe was a young firm known primarily for their residential commissions.

**U.S. District Court of Rhode Island:
Legislative history**

June 23, 1790 1 Stat. 128	Congress organized Rhode Island as one judicial district, authorized one judgeship for the U.S. District Court, and assigned the District to the Eastern Circuit.
February 13, 1801 2 Stat. 89	Judiciary Act of 1801 reorganized the federal courts into six circuits and assigned the District of Rhode Island to the First Circuit.
April 29, 1802 2 Stat. 156	After repealing the Judiciary Act of 1801, Congress in the Judiciary Act of 1802 again organized the federal courts into six circuits and assigned the District of Rhode Island to the First Circuit.
March 18, 1966 80 Stat. 75	One additional judgeship authorized.
July 10, 1984 98 Stat. 333	One additional judgeship authorized.